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# The Speck Connection: Recovering Histories of Indigenous Objects

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# The Speck Connection: Recovering Histories of Indigenous Objects

## **Abstract**

Frank Gouldsmith Speck (1881–1950), acknowledged as one of the most prolific anthropologists of the early 20th century, served as chair of the Department of Anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania for nearly four decades (1913–1949). He conducted ground-breaking ethnographic research, working closely with Indigenous informants from a wide range of communities (Cherokee, Haudenosaunee, Mohegan, Nanticoke, Penobscot, etc.) and amassed thousands of objects. Although his collections contain seminal data on tribal nations, languages, art, technology, and customs, public understandings of that data and those peoples are often flawed or incomplete, and the objects he collected are widely distributed among various museums.

## **Keywords**

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## **Disciplines**

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## THE SPECK CONNECTION: RECOVERING HISTORIES OF INDIGENOUS OBJECTS

By: Margaret Bruchac

Frank Gouldsmith Speck (1881–1950), acknowledged as one of the most prolific anthropologists of the early 20th century, served as chair of the Department of Anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania for nearly four decades (1913–1949). He conducted ground-breaking ethnographic research, working closely with Indigenous informants from a wide range of communities (Cherokee, Haudenosaunee, Mohegan, Nanticoke, Penobscot, etc.) and amassed thousands of objects. Although his collections contain seminal data on tribal nations, languages, art, technology, and customs, public understandings of that data and those peoples are often flawed or incomplete, and the objects he collected are widely distributed among various museums.



([http://dla.library.upenn.edu/dla/archives/image.html?q=frank%20speck&id=ARCHIVES\\_20080922002&](http://dla.library.upenn.edu/dla/archives/image.html?q=frank%20speck&id=ARCHIVES_20080922002&))

Frank Speck in his office in College Hall, University of Pennsylvania, c. 1930. Photo Credit: University of Pennsylvania Archives

### Relations of Collecting and Fictive Kin

The anthropological project, in Speck's time, was conceived as a large-scale rescue of what was presumed to be rapidly vanishing Indigenous material and data. The physical challenges of this enterprise were considerable: collectors had to travel great distances, navigate unfamiliar landscapes, and communicate in foreign languages, while also endeavoring to identify fixed social, geographical, and political boundaries among and between tribal individuals and nations. Speck's ethnographic research would have been virtually impossible without the intellectual and cultural contributions from his many Indigenous informants—Gladys Tantaquidegon (Mohegan), Will West Long (Cherokee), Witapanox'we (Delaware), and many others—who should more appropriately be viewed as research collaborators.

Early in his academic career, Frank Speck demonstrated an unusual willingness to interact with Native people on their home ground, practicing what he described to his students as “bedside ethnography,” a deeply personal mode of participant observation. He also welcomed his Native informants as regular visitors to the University...although he often used these visits as an excuse to absent himself from campus. William Fenton recalled:

*“No academic appointment, no learned gathering, no university functions took precedence over the visit of an Indian colleague, the summons of an Indian council, or the call to attend a ceremony.... Speck did not covet academic honors; rather, he valued the good opinion of his Indian friends equally with the esteem of his colleagues among academicians.”*<sup>[1]</sup>



Members of the Algonquin Council of New England at Roger Williams Park in Providence, Rhode Island, in 1924. (left-right) Chief Leroy Perry (Pocasset Wampanoag), Mrs. Steele (Narragansett), Chief Robert Clark (Nanticoke), Gladys Tantaquidgeon (Mohegan), Perry Congdon (Mohegan), Gertrude Harrison (Mohegan), Chief Mitchell (Narragansett), and Joe Strong Wolf. Photo by Frank Speck, Penn Museum Archives.

Speck's Native informants were not, as might be imagined, passive and politically naïve subjects patiently waiting to be discovered; they often had access to culturally authentic knowledges and objects and were willing to interface with non-Native collectors. Some of the most productive informants consciously sought out anthropologists and offered their services as interlocutors. Those who held formal positions of knowledge and authority as faithkeepers or chiefs strove to mediate anthropological relations in ways that could help their kin and communities. At the American Philosophical Society (APS) and elsewhere, the intellectual contributions of these Native informants and gatekeepers can be found buried in the archives that house the papers of prominent non-Native anthropologists.



Postcards from Frank Speck to Samuel Pennypacker, in the Penn Museum Archives. Photo by Margaret Bruchac with permission of the Penn Museum.

Collecting was rarely a simple matter of discovering and recovering objects in an orderly fashion; collections resulted from individual encounters shaped by selective manipulations of heritage and negotiations of value. Some Native informants chose to actively conceal items and knowledge; in other cases, sensitive items were given away or sold. The most vulnerable informants were the elderly, infirm, lonely, and desperate. They would sell a story for some friendly companionship, some songs for a bottle, a beaded belt for a loaf of bread. For example, when Cynthia Fowler was starving, Speck purchased the single thing of value she still owned—a strand of wampum beads. When Witapanox'we was ill and impoverished, Speck helped out his old Delaware friend by purchasing his ritual regalia, feathers, and peyote wands. When Cherokee traditionalist Will West Long needed some extra money, he parted with his book of medicinal formulas. Transactions like these suggest a certain degree of trust in Speck as fictive kin, but they also reflect the desperation of the times, and the hope that these objects might be kept safe until they could find their way home again.

### Recovering and Recontextualizing Scattered Data

The sheer volume of objects, publications, and unpublished manuscripts in the Speck collections, scattered into multiple institutions and archives, is so diverse that these collections could inspire multiple projects in cultural recovery and reconnection. Native American and First Nation objects collected by Speck were deposited in the collections of the Museum of the American Indian, Canadian Museum of Civilization (now the Canadian Museum of History), Peabody Essex Museum, Denver Art Museum, and the Penn Museum, as well as select European museums. However, in virtually every institution, curators and scholars devised individual interpretations of their collections based on what is locally “known.” As a result, related images, items, and data were physically sorted (and conceptually separated) in differing ways, often without clear records of their tribal identities and symbolic meanings.

In some cases, provenance data was preserved in archives, but detached from objects on display. In others, objects and photos of people using or wearing those objects were housed in separate locales. Data housed in one museum can often shed light on poorly identified objects in another museum. As I've noted elsewhere, this is particularly a matter for concern in college collections that have become imbued with new significances and meanings as curators and students have imposed new (and sometimes misleading) sorting methods over time:

*“Institutional memories were inevitably shaped by the handling patterns and hypotheses that surrounded these objects. Museum audiences, in turn, drew their understandings of native collections not from the aboriginal context but from the theories in effect at the moment of discovery, the opinions of scientific experts and curators, the text on the display card, or what they guessed (or wished) to be true.”[2]*



Beaded peyote feather fans used by Wi-tapano'xwe. Collected by Frank Speck and accessioned as part of the Samuel Pennypacker bequest. Photo by Margaret Bruchac with permission of Penn Museum. Museum Object Numbers 70-9-486 (<http://penn.museum/collections/object/166529>) and 70-9-481 (<http://penn.museum/collections/object/222118>).

As a case in point, one unusual collection of objects at the Penn Museum is cataloged as a donation from Samuel Pennypacker, one of Speck's wealthy students. The records of transactions between Pennypacker and Speck are vague and incomplete (comprised of a few file folders of postcards and miscellaneous notes), but taken together they represent an interesting set of negotiations. Pennypacker was always a source of ready cash, and Speck essentially served as an intermediary between his rich friend and Native people in need of money, rather like a pawnbroker. There is no record that Pennypacker ever sold any of the items he got from Speck; instead, he kept this select collection of Native American objects—primarily ceremonial masks and ritual regalia—and displayed them in a dedicated “Indian Room” in the Pennypacker Mansion outside of Philadelphia. The collection remained intact until 1968, when Pennypacker's widow donated the entire “Indian Room” to the Penn Museum.[3]

### Engaging Student Researchers

During the Spring semester of 2015, as part of their hands-on experience in restorative research, I challenged each of the students in my museum anthropology course to tackle a single object (out of more than 1,000 objects) from the Speck collections in the Penn Museum. I was certain that the process of closely examining a single object, while attempting to recover data on the Native individual who produced it, would provoke new insights into the nature of Speck's encounters with his Indigenous informants, and the role these encounters played in shaping anthropological knowledge.

The experience of conducting *restorative* research in museum collections and archives does much more than train students in museological methods of display and curation. My students learned how to examine minute object details, conduct archival research in primary sources, and critically query the inferences and speculations contained in secondary sources. They also learned about some of the ethics and protocols concerning specialized and sensitive knowledges, thanks to the information shared by my own Indigenous informants, several of whom are direct descendants of the people with whom Speck worked. As a final project, each student produced a report and a blog detailing the insights they gained and pointing the way for further research.

In sum, this kind of focused approach to investigating museum objects, and the stories people tell about objects, can help students develop more nuanced awareness of Indigenous collections, and gain more sensitive understandings of why, and to whom, these collections and these histories matter.

### Footnotes:

[1] William N. Fenton. 1991. “Frank G. Speck's Anthropology,” pp. 9-37 in *The Life and Times of Frank G. Speck, 1881–1950*, Roy Blankenship, ed. Philadelphia PA: University of Pennsylvania Department of Anthropology.

[2] Margaret M. Bruchac. 2010. “Lost and Found: NAGPRA, Scattered Relics, and Restorative Methodologies.” *Museum Anthropology* 33(2):137-156.

[3] My research into Speck's materials in the Penn Museum Archives revealed that virtually all of the objects in Samuel Pennypacker's “Indian Room” were originally collected by Frank Speck. Postcards from Speck and a small collection of letters from Native American informants are housed in a file folder of uncatalogued miscellaneous correspondence in the Samuel Pennypacker Papers, Penn Museum Archives, Philadelphia, PA.

**NOTE:** For additional posts on the Speck collection at the Penn Museum, see:

Margaret Bruchac: *Mackosi'kwe's Baskets: Marking Relationships* (<http://www.penn.museum/blog/museum/mackosikwes-baskets-marking-relationships/>)

Monica Fenton: *One Fan's Long and Winding Road to the Penn Museum* (<http://www.penn.museum/blog/museum/peyote-feather-fan/>)

Sarah Parkinson: *Sound and Motion in Museum Objects: Cherokee Stomp Dance Ankle Band Rattles* (<http://www.penn.museum/blog/museum/cherokee-dance-rattles/>)

Elizabeth Peng: *Potato Stamps and Ash Splints: A Narrative of Process and Exchange* (<http://www.penn.museum/blog/museum/potato-stamps-and-ash-splints/>)